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The Problem of Site Looting in East Texas

Timothy K. Perttula

It is likely that looting by treasure hunters and grave robbers has destroyed thousands of sites in East Texas. In the last 5 to 10 years, the vandalism and looting of archeological sites by commercial looters on private, state, and federal property has reached epidemic proportions (Perttula 1992). Undisturbed Caddoan Indian habitation sites and cemeteries, thought to date from about 1200 to 200 years B.P., are very vulnerable to disturbance and destruction by commercial collectors and looters. These folks are destroying forever irreplaceable evidence about Texas' cultural heritage.

The looting and vandalism of Caddoan sites has been a persistent Texas problem since the early 1900s. In an illuminating October 1931 letter regarding the looting problems in Northeast Texas, Professor John R. Swanton of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution, commented that "there seems to be no way to handle [the looters] except to salvage as much of the material as possible before they get to it." Professor J.E. Pearce of the University of Texas also noted in 1931 that

unemployed geologists...and farmers are digging up camp sites and burial places all over and selling the returns for whatever they can get...It is exceedingly discouraging. I am working as hard as I can with the funds at my disposal to salvage what I can of the situation.

The extent of looting and vandalism, so discouraging to Professor Pearce in 1931, has unfortunately continued to expand, particularly within the last 10 to 15 years as the price of illegally obtained grave goods escalates and the numbers of looters increases (Kenmotsu and Perttula 1993:36).

My study of the looting of Caddoan sites with burials and burial goods (e.g., ceramic vessels, arrowpoints, and items of non-utilitarian use such as burial blades, gorgets, earspools, or shell beads) indicates that most large cemeteries in East Texas have been subjected to intensive looting and vandalism. These activities have been particularly common in the Cypress Creek and Red River Basins where many large (+70 individuals) cemeteries occur. Many important Late Caddoan (about 500 to 300 years B.P.) sites have been thoroughly looted, and several of these have been on Federal land at Lake O' The

Pines. The archeological, mortuary, and bioarcheological information from these sites have been totally lost because of looting.

Some numbers better illustrate these points:

- (1) More than 350 Caddoan sites with human burials are currently known in East Texas; these contained an estimated 3200-3300 individual interments (Kenmotsu and Perttula 1993:Appendix 2.5.4);
- (2) More than 40 percent of all "known" Caddoan burials reported in the region are from nine large cemetery sites in the Red River and Cypress Creek Basins. These sites have all been looted, and at best only limited archeological or bioarcheological analyses were ever completed (see Jerome C. Rose, this volume); and
- (3) More than 50 percent of the 97 known Titus phase cemetery sites in the Cypress and Sabine River basins are known only from looting and vandalism activities (Perttula 1993). What we know about many of these sites usually consists of no more than a mark on a map--the rest of the information is gone forever.

What makes all this so discouraging for those of us who are interested in understanding and preserving the East Texas archeological record is that except for a few arrests for trespassing and damage to federal property, no major prosecutions for looting have been concluded by law enforcement agencies for these actions. Truly, in many cases no illegal activities have been committed because the sites are on private property and the looters are there with landowner permission!

There is no one panacea to point to that will help to overcome the ineffectual attempts to preserve and protect archeological sites in East Texas. New laws probably would not improve matters, since enforcing the laws remains difficult; furthermore, the reach of the laws do not typically extend to private lands. Nevertheless, a state burial law must be devised to protect from desecration unmarked graves and cemeteries.

Overall, however, it is my feeling that the public's interest and awareness in archeology needs to be fostered *as the best overall way* in which to achieve real site preservation and protection measures. This conference is one successful way to do this. Another way is to urge the participation of the public at every opportunity in archeological research and preservation/protection efforts, and hopefully developing a constituency that is willing to work to further the long-term stewardship of important archeological sites in Texas.

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